Review: A Band of Prophets
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan
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works she discusses than with what other people have said about or around autobiography. In *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* she has written the kind of book that contains from one to six footnotes for every page, and her exposition is studded with dropped names, though she is disarmingly honest, honest enough to acknowledge her numerous debts and even to admit that much of her leading notion was borrowed from Hannah Arendt.

Gunn is trying to show that autobiography is not a private act but a cultural one, and that it is an essential consequence of the way autobiography is written that the self revealed is never a hidden self but "the displayed self . . . the self that appears in the world and can be experienced, and thereby realized, by others." Passing through a series of chapters related to various aspects of her subject—the Autobiographical Situation, the Autobiographical Perspective, the Autobiographical Response—she ends with the final clinching chapter on the Worldliness of Autobiography. Essentially, she argues, autobiography is the *reading* of a life—by narrator as well as audience—rather than the *writing* of a life, which would be an act of total invention.

This is a provocative approach, and one wishes Janet Varner Gunn had supported it by spending more time on the direct examination of the texts she chooses to discuss instead of writing with an ear slanted to what the authorities have said. When it is too obviously dependent, criticism loses the flavor of immediacy.

A BAND OF PROPHETS

JAMES M. COX

It is good to have this book of essays commemorating the fiftieth birthday of *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) by Twelve Southerners; and it is good to be reviewing it two years after the Vanderbilt symposium celebrated the original publishing event. For in those two years events have accelerated in such a way as to make the original book, if not more relevant or timely, more prescient than the makers of the book in hand—despite its title—could quite foresee.

William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan, editors. *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years.* Louisiana State University Press, 1982. 190 pages. $12.95.

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After all, we are now well into the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who rose to power as representative of the Sun Belt, which is what the South has turned into. If Reagan, the midwesterner gone to Hollywood and from thence through the California governor's mansion to the White House, campaigned in the economic image of Calvin Coolidge on the one hand and in the political image of Franklin Roosevelt on the other, his administration bids fair to be the economic replica of Herbert Hoover's. Coolidge, as we are historically fated to see him, always occupies the position of picturesque irrelevance to the conditions that accompanied and succeeded him. He was nothing so much as a calculated image of regional agrarianism put forth as an advertisement by the dominant business community at the very moment when industrialism was completing the conquest of the South, the last truly rural stronghold in the country. Shy and taciturn, he seems to us sublimely ignorant of what was happening. The affable and loquacious Reagan, on the contrary, seems better at pretending not to know.

Yet the pretense increasingly fails to hide the fact that we may be at the threshold of recapitulating Hoover hard times. Without going into the problem of high interest rates in a period of recession, we can see that there is a world-wide inflation coupled with the possibility of a chain reaction of devalued currency on an international scale; high unemployment with less and less prospect of any significant decrease; a stock market whose violent volatility reflects absence rather than presence of a real base of production; and all this with a steady erosion of farm prices. There is, however, a difference between now and 1929. Farming —now quite properly referred to as agribusiness—is the one major producing element of the economy that keeps our balance of trade from being calamitous.

And precisely here there is another problem. The depression of farm prices coupled with high interest rates is starving the great farm machinery companies. Already International Harvester and Allis-Chalmers are experiencing profound tremors. If such should be the Case, can John Deere be far behind? And if this situation should spread to land and real estate values, what would be the issue? Land is, after all, the one commodity that is keeping its inflated value as if, in a world totally capitalized, some all-but-repressed Agrarian recognition yet persisted through all our economic conversion to agribusiness: that land is the only true basis of value. For all our wish to get away from earth, we cannot quite forget that we still truly live both on and off it.

That recognition was at the heart of the Twelve Southerners' attempt at re-cognition in 1930. Even for them, the recognition had been reduced to all but a memory, and their re-cognition was grounded in a consciousness of the impossibility of success for their vision. It was just this consciousness that gave imaginative energy to their enterprise and at the same time sealed their identity as true southerners. Lacking the balance

of moral complacency which New England, their victorious regional counterpart, had precariously hoarded and on which it scrupulously fed, these twelve disciples of a defeated region cut off even from God willfully—and we might want to say absurdly—attempted a text.

Fifty years later, the contributors to this book make their own attempt to assess the original text. The first essay, by Charles P. Roland, establishes a sociological context for what follows by surveying the actual South that the twelve southerners faced in 1929. That South was, according to Roland, a poor cousin to the affluent American society. It was morally poor in its adherence to racial segregation in a society always at the threshold of priding itself on equality; it was politically poor in its devotion to a party which had elected but two presidents in the sixty years since Appomattox; it was economically poor in pursuing a rural economy in the face of ever-expanding industrial dominance. Beyond that, it was educationally, religiously, and culturally poor in relation to the standards of a forward-looking industrial society. Insofar as it pursued economic and political prosperity by joining the Progressive movement and industrializing itself into the New South, its laggard state was all the more exposed. Thus there was the embarrassment of the Dayton trial in 1925, baring southern education, religion, and culture to the merciless lashing that Mencken skillfully administered—and so the South could be scapegoated as the area responsible for the national calamities of racial, educational, and religious bigotry. To know that Dayton, for all its 200 miles from Nashville, was nonetheless in the state of Tennessee is to begin to understand the true psychological sensitivity of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. Acute enough to smart under Mencken's blows, they were yet bold and intelligent enough to sally forth *politically* into northern print—their book was published by Harper & Brothers of New York—rather than take refuge in their literary or scholarly identity. Their sally was not in the Arthurian but in the Quixotic mode of chivalry. Not for nothing had Ransom written "Captain Carpenter"; and not for nothing could Andrew Lytle hilariously claim that the ignorance Frederic Law Olmsted encountered in antebellum poor white southerners who did not know the whereabouts of New York was but the sure knowledge that they knew where *they* were.

John Shelton Reed, whose essay follows Roland's, sees the sectionalism of the Agrarians under the sign of incipient nationalism. He contends that Agrarianism—with its emphasis on the folk culture, on cultural and economic grievances, on the South's being merely a colonial economy for the nation to the north, on a southern historical identity rooted in geographical space and peopled by a homogeneous population—is related to similar nationalistic movements in Viet Nam, India, Kenya, and Quebec. But he ignores the Agrarian awareness of the absolute impossibility of such a nationalistic enterprise. Before the Civil War there had been the threatening potentiality of nationhood for any section of the country.

New England had itself flirted with secession on more than one occasion; Texas, having declared itself a nation as a political step in the process of joining the Union, had all but fallen in love with the idea of itself as an independent republic; and abolitionists were urging right up to the Civil War that the free states separate from the abominable union with the slave interests. But the Civil War forever annihilated the possibility of secession. Instead of sections, there could henceforth be only regions—subordinate geographical areas without hope of independent political power or economic self-sufficiency—capable only of *imaginatively* asserting a dying cultural identity. To be sure the South, with its identity as a defeated treasonous province imposed from without, retained within itself a vivid memory of its tragic nationhood, but just as surely lived in the actuality of its complete defeat. Whatever the Agrarians might imagine for themselves culturally, they were not so rash, even in their statement of principles, as to propose nationhood. Moreover the Spanish-American War and World War I found southerners once more in the forefront of America's loyal fighters. My own grandfather, who had been a captain in the Confederate army, had seven sons, four of whom were in the American army in World War I.

It is Lewis Simpson, alone among the contributors to the symposium, who seems to me to see the true paradox of the Agrarian effort. For a long time Simpson has been developing his vision of a Republic of Letters evolving through the Renaissance and composed of clerks who were gradually converted into a secular and self-conscious separation from the church. The American republic, with its written Declaration and Constitution—written, it is well to remember, by political men of letters —is for Simpson an actual republic modeled on an invisible but "symbolic dominion of secular mind, the third realm in the western order of civilizational existence." The writers of the great texts of the American Revolution were thus at once political revolutionaries and members of a conscious literary movement—makers of history as well as critics of history. The succeeding generation of transcendentalist writers in New England, unable to make history, intensified their criticism of history to the point of being willing to flee from it into the oversoul. The writers of the emerging southern confederacy, on the other hand, committed themselves to a history-making political structure devoted not merely to chattel slavery but to a conscious effort to stop the slaves from learning to read and write. Such a division kept the slave outside the precincts of the polity of letters not by legislation but, in Simpson's words, "by removing the whole institution from any association with mind—with the society of history and science—and placing it within the context of an 'organic society,' in which all institutions are living parts of a ritualistic social order authorized by tradition and sanctioned by a coherent religious myth." Though I think Simpson's contention that the "Civil War was the defeat of the first government ever created by the self-conscious

literary mind modeled on the self-conscious literary intelligence" needs more corroboration than he here gives it, he is surely right in seeing Mark Twain as the strong American writer who, coming from the defeat of southern slavery into northern freedom, emerged with the radical vision that civilization itself is slavery writ large.

Simpson is also right in seeing Allen Tate's essay in *I'll Take My Stand* as the extreme essence of the southern Agrarian position. It was Tate, professing himself as hopelessly outside religion, who advocated that the South must seize violently a tradition it had never had! Tate actually saw the defeat of the South as more fortunate than any victory it could have won. He was later to remark that had the South won the war it would only have accelerated the triumph of industrialism within itself. Recognizing that his emotional affinity was with Jeffersonian principles, Tate nonetheless advocated a disciplined self-consciousness that would utterly deny the Jeffersonian vision. He ended his "Remarks on the Southern Religion" with this memorable paragraph: "The Southerner is faced with the paradox: He must use an instrument which is political, and so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it, to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life. I say that he must do this; but that remains to be seen."

Given a paradox of this intensity, it is small wonder that the southern Agrarians went on to develop a literary criticism reifying paradox and irony as the essence of poetic language. Indeed we might want to say that if the transcendentalists fled history for the oversoul, the Agrarians fled its Impossible Paradox for the more possible and accessible paradoxes of poetry. Yet it would be more accurate to say that these Agrarian critics could will poetry into objective reality precisely because their flight, grounded always in a terrible awareness of history from which they could not, and did not even want to, escape, carried with it not an abstract ideology but a purified emotion of rage which would be disciplined in form. That purified emotion, far from being their detachment from the ground of their history, was their relation to it. That is why their irony, whether in their critical or poetic vision, possesses a felt intensity for anyone even remotely sensitive to their prose and poetic rhythms. That is why Ransom, Lytle, Davidson, Tate, and Warren were critics as well as poets and novelists. If Simpson does not make this point, his essay makes it possible for me to make it.

That essay also provides a perspective on the succeeding essays. First comes a delightful essay by Robert Heilman, the one "outsider" who details his own agrarian Pennsylvania past. Heilman knows that anyone brought up in that environment wishes to get away from it, wishes to be more a part of the great American life and dream of acceleration and mobility—and knows all his life long that the toil of genuine rural life is not paradoxically but contradictorily related to the life of literature. Heilman's knowledge of life on the farm provides a firm basis for his

evaluation of the Agrarian vision of pastoral. He sees that, whereas pre-industrial pastoral idealized rural life in relation to wild nature, post-industrial pastoral idealized it in relation to technology. Thus, if Virgil had written the *Eclogues*, he also wrote the *Georgics* in which he celebrated the hard labor of overcoming nature; Wordsworth, on the other hand, saw science and technology threatening the nature that held the hiding places of his poetic power. Heilman is quick to see that Ransom, for all his readiness to battle with industrialism, possessed enough pre-industrial knowledge of pastoral to know that any hope of imaginative success in a war with industrialism had to be founded on a prior truce with nature. As Heilman shrewdly points out, you make truces with worthy foes. Having made such a truce, you are in a position to expose the industrial and religious clichés of conquering nature in the march of progress toward success or heaven. The person who has genuinely made a truce has a sense of having negotiated a passage and is equipped to translate life into a strong settlement with society as well as with nature. Recognizing these terms of settlement, Heilman perceives the strong social sense of *I'll Take My Stand* and shows how the twelve individual essays in the book were committed to a vision of community. In the process of his demonstration he identifies the apothegmatic textual moments throughout the book that bear witness for the possibilities of a gracious and decent society.

George Core addresses the subsequent history of the Agrarians—the subsequent history, that is to say, of the critics and poets among them, since that was the only true subsequent history there was to be. What differentiates these writers and critics for Core is their continued identity within the irritant academy rather than their flight from it. If Edmund Wilson could never leave journalism for the academy, the Agrarians could never leave the academy for journalism. Instead they developed a literary criticism that literally took over the academic study of literature, thus proving that along with their achievements in poetry, fiction, and criticism, they were the greatest of teachers. There are no teachers of literature today—no matter what their "approach"—who have not been taught by them. And so they succeeded after all. Viewing the contemporary academic scene with its splintered curriculum, its almost total emphasis on contemporary literature, and its obscurantist criticism in the service of more critics and criticism, Core overtly wonders whether they did not succeed too well. He concludes by wishing for a new critical movement that would free both literature and criticism from the arid academy. Yet he knows that such a movement will be unlikely in the extreme. The mass distribution of literature, ever accelerating out of industrial technology, makes such a movement all but impossible. Where but in the academy will there be *time* for such a movement? Where but in an academy like Vanderbilt could there be a *place* for celebrating the achievement of the Agrarians? The real prob-

lem, implicit in Core's discriminating discussion, is to show how the achievement of the Agrarians is consequent from rather than merely subsequent to their Agrarian manifesto. Just as they had found themselves in the academy, they greatly realized that, for all its irritable and oppressive environment, the academy was the place—the community, if you will—where not only the study of literature but the devotion to literature could flourish. Where would Faulkner *be* today in the minds of Americans—let alone of southerners—were it not for the academy? And where *will* he be if not in the colleges and universities of tomorrow? The great makers of literature may continue to emerge outside the academy—particularly in this country—but their readers and lovers will come from inside it.

Louis Rubin addresses *I'll Take My Stand* in its literary rather than its polemical and agrarian identity. Contending that the book was feckless in offering any agrarian program—none of the contributors believe greatly in the book's agrarian "reality"—he yet does not wish to see the book's value resting on the subsequent fulfillment of the southern New Critics or on the prior achievements of the Fugitive group. Instead he, like Heilman, contends that the book is a pastoral; but, unlike Heilman, he inclines to find its literary background in romantic and American poetry. He even takes the risk of relating the book to New England transcendentalism, but concludes by seeing it as a poem in the spirit of Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "a homage paid to the native dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and loves, and moves." At the same time he knows that these writers were not romantic poets, but southerners, and he takes pains to present the American historical and literary background out of which the book emerged. Tending to diminish the sense of pain and rage that are somehow embedded in the book's inception, he yet recognizes the cultural situation, at once defensive and aggressive, in which the Agrarians had their being.

The conclusion of the book is a transcript of a discussion by the three surviving Agrarians—Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren—moderated by Cleanth Brooks. Though there is not great substance in their discussion of the book's prophetic implications for our time, there is unquestionably a sense of their lively and enduring presence—a presence sufficient to remind us of both the mortality of those left alive and the immortality of the absent dead.

We are fortunate that there was a birthday celebration and doubly fortunate that William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan have so graciously and scrupulously made available to us a selected record of the occasion. Yet the critical intelligence should remain vigilant—particularly in the remembered presence of those true critics. I miss two main subjects in this book. First it seems to me that there should have been a thoroughgoing economic critique of Agrarianism based on an equally

thorough critique of capitalism. The essayists, for all their praise of the Agrarians, do little more than casually dismiss the actual economics of the Agrarians, who seem to me to deserve much better. Thus capitalism is left in undisputed possession of the field. There may be no Agrarian answer to its dominion, but Lyle Lanier and H. C. Nixon among the original Agrarians at least asked questions. And there are questions still to ask—questions about agribusiness, about the relation of culture to agriculture, and about land and land values (in every sense of the phrase) in relation to technology. The Jeffersonian vision, for all its loss in actual American history to the Hamiltonian "reality," will *never* die as long as America lives.

Beyond that I miss in this book any attempt to deal with the issue of race in the South. Roland mentions it in his survey of the South of the 1920s, but only Simpson deals with it bravely in his recognition of slavery in the Old South. Yet its absence as a subject in this book merely affirms its haunting presence as a reality. For all the tendency of the Original Twelve to keep it out of the Agrarian garden, they nonetheless had Robert Penn Warren, who was then in England, address the issue of the negro in the Agrarian vision of society. That of course was in 1930. Surely in 1980 that issue was as present as it had been then. Moreover any of us who are prone to attack industrialism or complacently revel in the Agrarian attack have to know that industrialism more than any other historical fact provided an economic base for the moral idealism that freed the South, by terrible force, from slavery. Frank Lawrence Owsley, for all his southern partisanship, saw that the great plantation slaveholders were somehow antithetical to the idealized agrarian vision he sought in southern history. And both Warren and Tate in their later work wrestled with the searing memory of racial tension and guilt and violence. Above all Faulkner, the preeminent figure of southern literature, struggled relentlessly with the ever-present reality of slavery and race in his imaginative reconstruction of the South. What southern American does not know—and know as well as any American (and especially as well as those Americans who have thought they knew it all)—the meaning of this presence? The more the southern Agrarians avoided it, the more exposed they were both culturally and inwardly to not only the strategies but also the necessities of defense. I am not asking for confession, accusation, complaint, or guilt. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has surely freed us, no matter what our persuasion, from such easy evasions. I realize that in a birthday celebration there are subjects all but impossible to face. Yet the true southern mode has been, as I have tried to suggest, not merely facing impossibilities but actually cultivating them. I wish that this particular birthday celebration had pursued this impossible subject.